

BALTIMORE NEWS-AMERICAN (MD)
16 February 1983

Agca linked to drug smuggling

CIA says Turk who shot pope was Bulgarian secret service's hit man

By John P. Wallach
Hearst News Service

WASHINGTON — Senior CIA officials have tentatively concluded that Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk convicted of shooting Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square, was an "enforcer of discipline" — a hit man — for the Bulgarian secret service in their illegal drugs-for-arms trade with Turkey and Western Europe.

The disclosure, which is the first time the CIA has linked Agca with arms and drug smuggling, comes less than 24 hours after a Russian and an Italian businessman were arrested in Rome on charges of spying for Bulgaria. The Russian heads the freight office of Aeroflot, the Soviet national airline.

That may mean, the officials said, that Moscow was involved in the arms trafficking through Aeroflot but the importance of the latest arrests is that they ultimately may provide a Soviet link to Agca himself.

In talking about their own behind-the-scenes inquiry, intelligence analysts here refused to be quoted directly because they are officially supposed to remain neutral while Italian prosecutors continue their investigation into the May 1981 assassination attempt.

The CIA is basing its own conclusions on evidence being supplied by Italian investigators and other West European governments. It is not conducting an independent investigation.

Some CIA officials have actively dis-

couraged speculation of a Bulgarian or Soviet KGB plot against the pope because they fear if such a link is firmly established, it could poison relations between the U.S. and former KGB chief Yuri Andropov, who may have ordered the plot, for a long time to come.

But these analysts today said they now believe there was a link between the Turkish assassin and the multimillion-dollar trafficking in guns and drugs that for more than a decade has been masterminded from Sofia, Bulgaria's capital. Agca has admitted spending almost two months in Bulgaria.

Italian prosecutors also have established that Agca associated with key criminal elements running the smuggling operation, including Musar Cedar Celebi and Bekir Celenk, two fellow Turks who are alleged to have offered \$1.2 million to Agca to kill the pope and supplied him with the money.

Bank statements, showing deposits in smaller amounts made out to Agca, have been discovered in his home town in Turkey. But curiously, the signatures on the deposit slips are not his own. The CIA meanwhile was reported last week to have concluded that both Russia and Bulgaria knew of Agca's plans.

In published reports, CIA officials were quoted as having said they now believe the two communist countries were aware

of Agca's reputation as a hit man, had heard him boasting of his intention to kill the pope but did not take the threat seriously.

Consequently, neither Russia nor Bulgaria did anything to stop him.

According to this theory, the Bulgarians were aware that in 1979, after escaping from a Turkish prison where he was serving a sentence for killing a Turkish newspaper editor, Agca had publicly threatened to kill the pope. The Bulgarian secret service nonetheless recruited him as a hired gun.

Later, this theory goes, when Agca found himself in Rome on a mission for the Bulgarians, he independently plotted to assassinate the pope, without the explicit support or foreknowledge of the Bulgarian secret service. The trouble with this theory is that it does not seem to go far enough.

For example, Agca has named three Bulgarian agents as being involved in the plot against Pope John Paul II. Two of them have since escaped back to Bulgaria. A third, Sergei Ivanov Antonov, is under arrest in Rome. Antonov was head of Balkanair, Bulgaria's national airline.

Agca has described the contents of Antonov's apartment down to the last detail. It was in his apartment, Agca contends, where the plot was hatched. To several CIA analysts here, it is almost inconceivable that Bulgarian secret agents could have been involved without the knowledge of the government.